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SOCIAL ART

AN ADDRESS DELIVERED TO

**The Open Table of
The National Arts Club**

By Mr. F. W. RUCKSTUHL

January Twenty-fifth, 1915

Published by THE OPEN TABLE of
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Second Edition

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Social Art

An Address Delivered to
The Open Table of The National Arts Club
January 25, 1915

Mr. Chairman and Gentlemen:

THERE are only two truly worthy energies in this life—and they are Love and Art. All else—science, philosophy, business, politics, are mere rubbish—except in so far as they help to spread love and the beautiful. By love I mean all kinds of love, above all that highest kind—love of your fellow man. And by Art I mean all kinds of art, from architecture to music, from poetry to sculpture, and from painting to landscape gardening. For, the deepest longing of every normal man is to abolish war, to establish peace and a paradise on this earth, here and now.

And yet, although, next to Love, Art is the highest activity in this life, the art world is, as the historian Ferrero lately said, in a state of anarchy, through the warring of all kinds of “isms”, each more insane than the other, against the sane art of all the epochs of the past.

The same anarchy existed in the philosophic world until Bacon taught what philosophy really is, and how to reason with common sense—inductively instead of deductively—and by never adopting an assumption until proven to be a fact.

The same anarchy existed in the moral world until

Kant showed what morality is, and formulated his immortal "Categorical Imperative:" "Act so that your action may be made the universal standard of action." Slowly this dictum has dispelled the anarchy in the moral world. And the anarchy in the art world will not disappear until we decide on what art really is, and until we adopt an invulnerable *Definition* of art.

But the art world is divided into artists of every degree of commerciality and spirituality. Some seek only money and notoriety, others seek mainly immortality: by carving out a niche in the hearts of their fellowmen. Hence, many artists are opposed to any definitions of art, because they are hampered by them in their pursuit of either money or an extreme "individuality." Edwin A. Abbey painted in flaring letters, on the interior of the dome, at Harrisburg, this ipse-dixit: "Art deals with things, forever incapable of definition." This was childish, because Véron had already, in 1873, in his "Aesthetics," given a sound definition of art, *in the abstract*. Where he failed was in not making a definition which implied the existence of two categories of art—Great Art and Trivial Art, and defining Great Art. For, unless we do define art, and also great art, there is no fruitful discussion possible on art matters. Hence, we are forced to agree with Voltaire: "If you wish to converse with me,—define your terms." And so, I will give you what many consider a complete and final definition of art.

Previous to the fall of 1898 I was frequently called by the U. S. Government to testify as to whether certain statues, held for duty at the Custom House, here, were works of art. One day, in 1898, while Charles R. Lamb and I were building the Dewey Arch at 23rd Street and Fifth Avenue, he as Architect and I as General Manager, he approached me, looking somewhat gloomy. "What's the matter, old man?" I queried. "Oh," he replied, "I have just come from the Custom House where I lost a case. I had one

of my church altars cut in Caen stone, in Caen, France, and when, it got here, I was forced to pay duty, on the plea that it was not a work of art. I protested. But a number of sculptors said it was not a work of art. And so I lose."

"What!" I said, "They testified your altar is not a work of art?"

"Yes," he replied.

"Why, they are dreaming!" I said, and I told him my idea of what constitutes a work of art, and why his altar is, inevitably, a work of art.

"Will you testify to that before the Collector?"

"Surely!" I replied. And we went to work on the Arch.

Later, I was subpoenaed before the Collector and, as near as I can recollect, this took place: Arrived at the Custom House I took my seat and, while the stenographer and the Collector listened, his attorney established my status as an expert. Then he placed before me a blueprint of an altar. After examining it I said: "Well, sir?"

"Do you consider that a work of Art?" he asked.

"I certainly do."

"You do?"

"I do."

"Well!" with a solemn pause, "do you know that St. Gaudens, Ward, Hartley, MacDonald, Rhind and others have testified that it is not a work of art?"

"That does not worry me. A man may be a great success as a synthetic sculptor and a great failure as an analytical thinker. All the men you mention have simply never gone to the bottom of things in their thinking on the theory of art, and aesthetics."

"Well," he said, with a sardonic air, "Can you define Art?"

"Yes, I can," I replied.

"Will you kindly do so?"

I then gave him this definition of Art:—

Every human work, made in any language, with the purpose of expressing, or stirring, human emotion, is a work of art; and a work of art is great in ratio of its power of stirring the highest emotions of the largest number of cultured people for the longest period of time.

"Well," he said, "isn't that rather broad?"

"Of course, it is broad. A definition, in order to define, must be broad; it must be both inclusive and exclusive, and I think you will find mine conclusive."

He looked stale-mated. And I continued, "All thinkers on art, however they may differ on detail, agree on this: That the function of all artists is: First, to *express* their own emotions, and second, to *stir* the emotions of their fellowmen, be those emotions trivial or great, high or low. Now, a cathedral is the greatest instrument on earth for stirring the highest human emotion, and the altar is the most important part of that instrument. If the altar is a mere rock, it is not a work of art, it is a mere article of *use*. But, if the altar shows some kind of *Design*, and an effort to make the altar *beautiful*, in order to arouse the emotions and lift the soul of the worshippers, it is a work of art, no matter what its design. You have not asked me is this altar of Mr. Lamb a *Great Work of Art*. And that is none of the government's business. The question the government alone should ask is this: 'Is this altar a work of art?' I reply that, if it were the most grotesque design in the world, so long as the deliberate purpose of the artist was: to express his emotions and to arouse the emotions of his fellowmen, however simple or complex, skilful or crude, his design may be, it is a work of art, no matter how it may grate upon the feelings of other men whose tastes differ from that of the artist. The sculptors who testified that Mr. Lamb's altar is not a work of art meant to imply that it is not a *Great* work of Art. But, for the purpose of the infliction of a tariff, the government should not ask is a work of art *Great* or *Trivial*. It should allow

every original work of art, however good or bad, to come in free, for an American, and strike with fifteen per cent duty every such work of art of an alien. The only question the government should ask is this: "Is it morally clean and an original work of art, that is, not a duplicate, not a copy. Many critics call many of the works of Rodin fine, many others call them crimes in marble. Who is going to decide? Hence, the question of the excellence or greatness of a work of art, imported, is beyond the province of the government, so long as the work is morally clean."

"That is all," he said.

The case went to Washington, and Mr. Lamb won. The government accepted my definition of art; and, reversing the Collector's decision, even though bolstered up by the testimony of the leading sculptors named above, returned him his money.

This incident shows the supreme importance of a final and correct definition of art, from which no one can escape. And I think that my definition, as above given, is such a final one.

Let me analyze this definition. You will observe that my definition defines art in the *Abstract* and also defines *Great Art*. Now, an ordinary drinking glass, totally devoid of ornament, is not a work of art, it is a work of mere use. But, as soon as some man is moved—emotional—to express some joy in carving, or painting, upon that glass, some flowers, or graceful lines, so as to give it *beauty*, it is at once taken out of the category of articles of mere use and becomes a work of art; a trivial, perhaps crude, work of art, but nevertheless:—a *Work of Art*.

But, such a glass can never be called a *Great Work of Art*, no matter how skilfully carved, unless the subject is so lofty and so wonderfully executed, that it not only expresses the highest emotions of the man who made it, but also stirs the lofty emotions of his fellowmen. That is to say: The higher the

emotion that a work of art is able to stir, in cultured men, and the greater the number of men whom it thus can stir, and for the longest period of time, that is the greatest work of art in the world. And the more a man, or a work of art, lifts us above ourselves, the commonplace and of the earth earthy, to the sublime, the more we learn to love the man and the work of art. There is no escape from this.

Judged by that standard the greatest epic Poem is: Homer's "Illiad;" the greatest short poem, Bryant's "Thanatopsis;" the greatest drama, Shakespeare's "Hamlet;" the greatest picture made during the last five hundred years is Raphael's "Transfiguration;" the greatest statue is Michaelangelo's "Moses;" the greatest building, the Capitol at Washington—but, now, irritating, in spots, because unfinished, and marred by bad decorations, but which, when once properly finished, will be the sublimest building on earth.

The "Modernistic," "Cubistic," and "Futuristic" imitators of prehistoric barbaric art, and of insane tendencies, will laugh at these verdicts. But time is constantly reaffirming them.

Not to go too deep into psychology, let me say—we are a trinity, composed of a body which experiences *Sensations*, of a mind which harbors *Feelings*, and of a soul which experiences *Emotions*. We *exist* in our body, but we really *live* in the emotions of our Soul, when we can be said to live at all. Our emotions are of two kinds: Negative and Positive. The negative emotions are the various kinds and degrees of mere surprise or astonishment, neither agreeable nor disagreeable emotions. It is true that Emerson said:

"We mount to Paradise
On the stairway of surprise."

But he, evidently, meant those of our emotions

of surprise which are both lifting and, more or less, ecstasizing.

Now, the positive and highest emotions are the various kinds and degrees of *Mirth*, of *Delight*, and of *Awe*. Because, when these *emotions* are stirred, they lift us the farthest away from ourselves and above the earth earthy, and develop various degrees of the *feelings* of Serenity, Joy and Reverence, which includes Sympathy for Mankind.

The importance of my definition of Art is derived not from my defining art in the abstract, not because the U. S. Government accepted my definition, but because it is the first definition, in the history of aesthetics, which, besides defining art in the abstract, also defines Great Art, and asserts that the greatness of a work of art depends upon its power of stirring our highest emotions and for the longest period of time. Thus it furnishes a beacon light, for all those artists who wish to create truly great and *enduring* art, instead of wasting their lives producing ephemeral artistic stunts, destined for the morgue of oblivion.

Another important point. Every aesthetician, from Baumgarten to Tolstoi, agrees: that Art is a *Language*, for communicating with our fellowmen. This has, lately, been questioned by a few aberrated writers on art. My definition re-affirms that Art is a *language*.

Finally, my definition divides art into two great categories: Trivial and Great Art. That is, merely Decorative and Playful Art, and Expressive and Stimulative Art. What divides the two like a wall? *The spirit of Social Service.*

A merely *decorative* work of art is addressed only to the senses, having no meaning beyond satisfying our sensuous love of agreeable lines, colors, sounds and movements. And this is a trivial function by the side of the great spiritual function of arousing the highest emotions of the soul of mankind. An *expressive* work of art of any kind, in which the artist clearly aimed to

produce a thing so beautiful, by *poetizing* his subject, so as to arouse universally the emotions of mankind, belongs to the category of Great Art, even if it lacks mere technical cleverness. Why? Because, when we produce a thing which gives joy and ecstasy to the majority of mankind, or at least of our own race, we create an active, *unifying* social force, a thing that brings all men of our race, high or low, prince or peasant, into a *sympathetic* relation. It tends to increase the love between man and man. And that is the highest thing possible on this earth. And, when we engage in such an activity, we ally ourselves with the loftiest forces of nature, or with our Heavenly Father, "Who so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son," to lift mankind into a greater and grander *unity*. Therefore, those expressive works of art, which show that the artists struggled hard to stir our loftiest emotions, they belong to the category of great art. It makes no difference if they are technically as defective and awkward as are the works of Fra Angelico, at Florence, or of Orcagna, at Pisa, when compared with such perfect works as Titian's "Assumption," or Leonardo's "Last Supper." Just as the hunchback slave Æsop is in the category of great men, because he has solaced and buttressed the courage of mankind and spiritualized its aspirations, so, even the awkward works of Angelico and Orcagna are great because they radiate a *social* spirit which has lifted the souls of millions of men above the commonplace to the sublime, above the material to the spiritual. Thus they became a social power, working for higher social ends. They became unifying, *binding* forces which still work in the direction of concentrating the energies of men:—for the perfection of the race and its environment. That is what entitles them to be placed in the temple of truly Great Art. Therefore, when the facts of life and of nature lift an artist into a state of sublime creative emotion, and he translates that

emotion into a work of supreme beauty that arouses sublime emotions in his fellow men, high or humble, he becomes a conqueror of the world. While the artist who spends a long life in merely expressing himself, in smart or clever works, which show clearly that he thought nothing of lifting his fellow men to noble, spiritual enterprises, but, rather, of calling the attention of the world to his clever, technical, stylistic stunts, he is destined to be forgotten. For, as Emerson said: "The true artist has the planet for his pedestal, the adventurer, after years of strife, has nothing broader than his own shoes." That is to say, the difference between Trivial and Great Art is one of *Morals*,—of a spiritual and a social *purpose*. How beautifully this is proven by the history of art:

Raphael has for five centuries been called the Prince of *Painters*. This is a mistake. He was not the Prince of Painters. He should have been called the Prince of *Artists*. The real prince of "painters" was Velasquez. He was the painter-magician, the wizard of the brush! Then why has Raphael steadily held the love of mankind, while Velasquez was forgotten for two hundred years? I will tell you. It was because Raphael aimed to *captivate* the *soul* of mankind, by lifting it to the sublime, while Velasquez strove merely to *astonish* the *intellect* of his contemporaries, with manual dexterity. Raphael was warm-hearted and full of sympathy. Velasquez was self-centered and walked alone. Being a Realist, Velasquez forces an intellectual tribute from artists and arouses their envy. But, being devoid of poetry and spirituality, he fails to win the love and veneration of mankind.

During my stay of ten days in Madrid I spent eight mornings in the Prado, studying Velasquez; and, the more I studied his work, the more my intellect admired it, and the more it left my soul unmoved. Then I understood why the great public forgot him,

and is still forgetting him, while the artists—in search of *cleverness*—finally resurrected him and have placed him on a pedestal.

Velasquez is the painter's master and supreme teacher of the tricks of painting; and, as such, deserves the veneration of all students of *mere painting*. But Raphael, a less skilful painter, is the master of the world, because he is the supreme artist and painter-Poet! When will our artists remember the profound remark of Amiel: "Cleverness is useful in everything, sufficient for nothing!"

Now, I define a Social work of art as follows: Every work of art is a social work of art which, in some way, aims, by easily understandable forms of beauty, to unite men in a common emotion, and a common pursuit of social perfection; and a social work of art is great in ratio of its technical perfection and of its lifting, spiritual beauty.

How, the clever, coruscating, charlatanistic, self-centered, admired, but unloved, Whistler would enjoy wiping his feet on this definition!

That is to say: Every great social work of art is an emotion-stirring *celebration*, an apotheosis of some great beauty of nature, or of some great achievement or virtue of some man, or group of men, or of some nation; and also, every great art epoch of the past has been inspired by some great *social purpose*. It was a social celebration, in which the egotism of the artist and his desire for bantam-rooster self-parading, was kept at a minimum.

Thus, when, after the battle of Salamis and the defeat of the Persians, Greece resolved upon a national celebration, it arose to such a power of national emotion that the Parthenon was the result; then followed the Erechtheion, and the two have been dominating the art of the world ever since. These are great social works of art, inspired by a social purpose, and were produced by a great social effort, by many men, to glorify the Greek race.

When Augustus began to celebrate the triumph of the Latin race, the prodigious works that grew in Rome, were not brazen, "individualistic" parading of *one* artist, it was a social parading of the Roman people, glorifying its achievements. The wondrous Gothic Oratorios in stone, of the Thirteenth Century, were inspired by a common social purpose: to celebrate the victory of Christianity and to glorify the Church. And thousands of great artists utterly sank their "individuality" in the "Guilds" which created those superb cathedrals. The same is true of the Renaissance. It was the social spirit of the Humanism, of the Florentine Democracy, that made possible the treasures of half of Italy, and it was the celebration of the Triumph of the Papacy that called forth the communal spirit that produced the wonders of the art of Cinqua Cento Rome.

Versailles was but the glorification of France, by scores of artists—a social purpose animating every artist engaged on it; and this social spirit, of glorifying France, dominated most of French art down to 1850. The same is true of Dutch Art. The common social purpose of glorifying the final victory of the Dutch people over the cruel Spaniard runs through all the art of Flanders, now consciously, now unconsciously.

But, *Social* art began to fall into disrepute about 1850, when that Parisian semi-maniac, Baudelaire, apotheosized Egotism and mere *Novelty*, and raised the pursuit of "Individuality" into an "ism." Then gradually grew the malady of Egomania and the craze for self parading. And, when egotism had run to seed, there grew up the so-called "Modernistic" artists, more or less grotesque, commercial and hypocritical charlatans, who cried out in the avenues of the art world, the cheap sophistry: "We must intellectualize our emotions!" and also that deadening slogan of the "Impressionists":—"The search for the beautiful is an

antique fad, the modern artist should seek not beauty, but *Character*, expressed with a *personal technique*!"

You might as well howl to the winds that oil and water will mix, as to talk about "intellectualizing our emotions." For, intellectuality is the very antithesis of emotion, as every Psychologist knows. The more you intellectualize your emotions, the more you paralyze them. And you will wreck the emotion-stirring power of your art work just as fast as you intellectualize it.

The initial cause of the anarchy in the Modern Art world is: the degeneracy of the artists and the deliberate departure of the "Modernistic" band of artists from the great principle:—that the stirring of our highest emotions is the highest function of a great artist, and the assertion that art should confine itself to a titillation and a shocking of our intellectual curiosity. Hence, these men abandoned the creation of beautiful and sublime things for the production of all sorts of mere *curios*, in every branch of art—not knowing that, an art that does not stir the emotions, but merely astonishes the mind, is destined for the morgue of the art world, where, in the words of Hamlet, it will "rot and rot," until a wearied mankind will jostle it into the abyss of oblivion.

Science is based on reason and intellect. But Art is based entirely on emotion and feeling. Whatever else an artist may do, in a work of art, his primal aim must be to stir the emotions of his fellow men:—if he hopes to have his work endure. Intellectualize our emotion? What intellectual aberration! And should it ever happen, that our nervous ganglia and spiritual centres should degenerate far enough towards the savage to be able to find emotional satisfaction in the hybrid art of the Cubists and Futurists, then Macaulay's New Zealander will surely be sitting upon the ruins of our civilization, with a sardonic grin upon his face!

It would take too long, gentlemen, to recount

how social art, great art, fell into disrepute in certain corners of the art world, nor will I bore you with an analysis of the evolution of the humbug "modernistic" art party of today, with its mystifying, anti-social art, deliberately made to be understandable only to "the few," to the "divinely illuminated," esoteric, highfalutin "Mandarins of Art," living in their "Ivory Towers," as George Sand said, but an art meaningless to us "dull, intellectually atrophied bone-heads and artistic jelly-fish"—as they impudently call all normal art lovers. But I will say, this anti-social art spirit was fathered by that pseudo-philosopher Nietzsche, whose ego-mania made him engender his philosophy of the "superman" and "individualist" worshiping only himself, and then drove him into an insane asylum. And it was then nursed and helped along by that diabolical piece of human effrontery—Baudelaire, poet and critic of art, who, before going mad, wrote to Theophile Gautier: "A little charlatanism is permitted to genius; it even sits well. It is like the rouge on the face of a pretty woman—a new inspiration to the mind."

Then it was helped along by such aberrated men as Huysmans who, as our own Hunnecker says, in his: "The Egotists," "Was an aristocrat, who descended into the gutter, there to analyze the various stratifications of filth," and then buried himself in a convent, to die there, insane; and the blatant, red-headed Manet, eternally bawling for "Liberty in Art," and whose anti-social pictures—"Nana," "Breakfast on the Grass," and "Olympia," are fit only for a Bowery dive; Renoir, who, from beautiful art, went to vulgar "intellectualism;" Monet, whose art became so "scientific" that normal people will have none of it; Degas, whose chief joy in life seems to be to draw, with marvelous skill, fat women in their toilet tubs, or hungry ballet girls in the "flies" of the opera house; Rodin, who has besmirched the face of man and God with more vulgarity than Fragonard and Clodion ever dreamt

of; Felecion Rops, whose marvelous etchings are so full of lubricity that I could not get to see them in the Paris Library, until I had found a special permit; Whistler, the most overrated artist that ever lived, who advertised himself into notoriety by the charlatan methods recommended by his spiritual master, Baudelaire; Mallarmé, the paradoxical poet; Verlaine, the drunken rhymster, who rattled out of a monstrous head a lot of vapid jingles; and Zola who openly paraded two wives and families before the world, and whose coarseness has now lost its taste even for the "Apaches" of Paris, and who threw out this sad sophistry: "Art is a piece of nature seen through a temperament," and which induced cobblers, bung-men, barbers, truckmen, thieves, sirens of the street, hoboes, cab-drivers, etc., to inundate the "Salon of the Independents" with hysterical creations, weird beyond measure, because they said they had a temperament as fine as that of Zola, works which were the forerunners of the degraded art of today. All these men, and their congeners, were sick with the microbe of "Individualism," ignorant of the fact that true individuality cannot be achieved by main strength and awkwardness; that the artist must be born with it; and that, if he has it, it will creep into his work in spite of himself. For, as Goethe says: "The artist, make what contortions soever he will, can bring forth only his own individuality." All these men were abnormal, whose intellectual aberration, or moral degeneracy, is beautifully analyzed by Max Nordau, in his book on "Degeneration," which I recommend you to read.

These are the protagonists of the present anarchy in the art world. These, assisted by the commercial bunco-art dealers, of the Rue Richemense and the Avenue de l'Opera, and the corrupt and bribed newspaper critics of the Rue Montmartre, who, like a lot of cuttlefish muddying the waters, dropped all over Europe bomb-shells of such black falsehoods, esoteric mystifi-

cations and of pseudo-intellectual paradoxes, to cunningly confuse the weak-minded, that the atmosphere of the whole art world has become like a grey fog, which only the clairvoyant can see through. Even in our own land egotistic "style" and peculiarity of "technique," devoid of all poetry, became demigods. Our own painter, Chase, said in print: "There are no such things as poetic subjects. Velasquez could have painted a sublime masterpiece of a yellow dog with a tin-can tied to his tail!" A phrase which is the apotheosis of the tricks of painting and a belittling of great art.

How far the present hideous war in Europe was helped along by the ego-mania of the Nietzsche and the Baudelaire men, ever howling for a bigger place in the sun, in which to cackle, parade, and beat the big bass drum, and, so helping along the universal ego-mania, even of the Autocrats and leaders of the men in Europe, I leave to the historian to say. But, that it did help the present social anarchy in Europe, is certain, since art, dynamically, reflects and influences the states of mind and of soul of every epoch. That is why we should storm against this bunco-Albino art, because it is a hybrid, an anti-social, disuniting, disintegrating art.

We should say as Louis XIV said when he found on his walls the brutal works of Van Ostade, Teniers and their like,—"Take away those maggots there!"

Now, what of our own art of the future? Are we going to make it social or anti-social? Are we going to follow and imitate the ego-mania and "individualism" run to seed of the modernistic art party of Europe, or are we going to be ourselves, Americans, and seek to express the great ideal before us:—the ideal of a more and more social, more and more perfect, spiritual Democracy, in this wonderful land of ours?

Let every American artist, when he feels himself drawn to borrow any foreign spirit of art, remember this solemn warning of our greatest poet-thinker

"There comes a time in the experience of every man when he realizes that envy is ignorance and—imitation is suicide."

And let us never forget that mere rhyming, carving and painting, no matter how wonderful, are not art at all; they are parts of art; they are mere technical skill; and that, unless this technical skill is used in conjunction with grandeur of conception, profundity of expression and nobility of composition, it does not rise higher in the scale of worthy employment than dexterous skill in billiards.

In short, Gentlemen, the supreme question before us in the art world today is this:—Are our artists going to waste their great technical powers in doing vaudeville, song-and-dance, technical stunts, which will reduce our art world to a hysterical, Coney Island jungle of intellectual and moral confusion in which mankind will flounder about for a while, between astonishment and aberration, some in beatific wonder and others in detestation, until the public flees from our art world in disgust, or will our artists produce great works of art which, radiant with every degree of beauty, from the graceful to the sublime, and animated by a binding *national spirit*, will stir, not the low, but the highest, emotions of our own people, until, like in the Periclean and Renaissance epochs, our artists shall transfigure the art of America, by making it supremely sane and supremely Social?

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